



# Global Warming: Too Hot To Handle

## Ian Baron reports on the Kyoto conference

SOLVING the environmental crisis is not a problem of science or of technology. It is a problem of ideology. This necessitates a thorough debate on philosophy before we can hope to minimise the waste of time over partial experiments and non-solutions.

Without a radical reappraisal of the principles, we can expect victory for the vested interests in the United States. Their corporate attitude stems from a false belief in the right to pollute the environment.

The Kyoto conference in December was not a meeting of minds. The United States stood out as a reactionary nation which was more concerned about profits than the welfare of humanity and the environment. The Global Climate Coalition made sure that the US representative, Vice President Al Gore, did not make any concessions that would prejudice the interests of oil, gas, car and heavy industry.

The Coalition's argument was brutally simple: could exporters compete if the US was forced to raise taxes that curbed the emission of pollutants?

Scientists claimed that more than 20 million people faced starvation, drowning or dying of thirst in the next 50 years because of the "unstoppable juggernaut" of climate change. British scientists expect temperatures to rise by 1.4 degrees centigrade by 2050 if governments refuse to take action. If US proposals to stabilise emissions were accepted, the rise would be 1.3 centigrade.

But it was not even possible to

achieve a consensus on the basic facts. According to the US lobby, the scientific case was not proven. *The Wall Street Journal* provided the platform for repeated attacks on scientists who claimed that the earth was warming. Two chemists from the Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine supplied graphic evidence (above) to argue that solar activity was responsible for earth warming. Global warming, they claimed, was a myth.

IF NATIONS fail, the cause will be confusion over the rights and responsibilities associated with the use of nature's resources.

From the inception of industrial society, manufacturers have used these resources - both of the renewable and depletable kind - as if they were free; except, of course, when they were obliged to pay individuals or governments that claimed proprietorial rights. Then, the rental value of those resources was charged.

The system did not work well. The result has been an enormous squandering of precious resources. For example, estimates from the Rocky Mountain Institute in Colorado suggest that the US wastes \$300 billion (£177 billion) worth of energy every year - more than the nation's entire defence budget.

Such waste has nothing to do with the principles of capitalism known as the Protestant ethic. If corporations adhered to the value-for-money ethic, they would not waste valuable

resources. There is something amiss in the book-keeping procedures of the industrial system that originated in Western Europe.

If industrial countries had lived up to the 1992 Earth Summit promises to cut carbon dioxide emissions to 1990 levels by 2000, we might be on course for containing the problem. But the US has already overshot the target by 13% and can now promise to get back to parity only by 2013. The European Union aimed for 15% reductions by 2010. This was below the reduction that scientists say is necessary.

The Kyoto agreement was barely worth the paper on which it was written. Congressional spokesmen said they would not endorse it. The US government, it seems, is beholden to the fossil fuel lobby. It sought a solution in the offer to "buy" cuts in emissions in other countries, notably Russia (whose industry is hamstrung, for now).

A democratic debate about the environmental crisis would demonstrate that the property rights favoured by the US are not appropriate. It is not the buying of rights to pollute that should govern behaviour, but rather the obligation to pay for the privilege of using the environment. This is not mere semantics. The words represent different kinds of worlds. The first is an abusive philosophy that rides roughshod over the rights of people and nature. The second represents harmony between people and nature, the philosophy we have to rediscover in the 21st century.